

# AmeriCorps NEWS

FOR MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE AMERICORPS NATIONAL SERVICE NETWORK

## Members On The Fire Line In The West

Fire fighting is hard, dirty work as the AmeriCorps members who battled raging blazes in Western states last summer can attest. "Our whole bodies smelled of burning wood and soot," recalled Rob Callahan, an AmeriCorps\*NCCC team leader from the Charleston campus. "But it's kind of a rite of honor. The teams that came back dirty did a lot of work, so the dirtier you are, the more respect you get."

Working with crews from the National Park Service and National Forest Service, AmeriCorps\*NCCC teams from the Charleston, Denver, and Perry Point campuses responded to fires in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming during August and September. In addition, a crew from AmeriCorps St. Louis Partners traveled to Butte, Montana to help fight what—at the time—was the largest single fire in the country.

Fighting fires consisted of "a

three-mile hike in every day, carrying a 20- or 30-pound pack, then digging a fire line and hiking back to camp," recalled Stacey Cavaliere, team leader for one of the Perry

Point teams. "also patrol fire lines "to make sure nothing creeps over into green areas," explained Kara Wiegand of Perry Point.

When the work stretches into



A team of AmeriCorps\*NCCC and National Park Service firefighters take a break in Nevada, 60 miles north of Ely.

night, firefighters have to camp out—sometimes without sleeping bags. That means bedding down on ground covered with dust, ashes and charred wood, since sleeping on unburned land is dangerous. Cavaliere took the

conditions in stride, saying, "It made

us stronger and less needy of material possessions and cleanliness."

As a first time experience, fire fighting provided insights and memories for the AmeriCorp\*NCCC members. Cipriano Martinez, from the Perry Point campus, described the assignment as "a humbling experience because you see the magnitude of destruction that fire

Besides digging fire lines, fire fighting involves cutting open smoldering trees to put out the sparks and spreading water dropped by helicopters or supplied by engine crews. Water is not always available; at those times, firefighters move everything from a hot spot, separating burning limbs and coals and covering them with dirt. They

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**D**ear Members:

As I write this, many of you have recently started your AmeriCorps service. Your efforts hold the promise of helping troubled communities, and of personal growth as you encounter situations that are new to you.

My hope for each of you is that your time with AmeriCorps will be a lasting, profoundly

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powerful, and positive experience. Not only will you be able to look back on your service with pride, but you will also incorporate service into your life beyond AmeriCorps. Our motto, "Getting Things Done for America," is one to make your own. There is no shortage of need as your service will no doubt make clear to you.

For AmeriCorps, this is a time of reaching back and reaching out. We're reaching back to those who filled the ranks of VISTA in the early days of the "domestic Peace Corps," which started 35 years ago.

AmeriCorps\*VISTA staff is working to contact all former VISTA members to ask for their help in the future. We still need their help, and we will still need yours once your service is complete.

And we're reaching out—expanding programs, strengthening partnerships—with such organizations as Habitat for Humanity, the Boys & Girls Clubs, American Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the National Park Service, to name just a few. We take great pride in the establishment of the Tribal Civilian Community Corps. Our AmeriCorps\*NCCC program model is being used in an exciting way as Native Americans establish four residential service programs. The programs, based in Alaska, Arizona, California, and Minnesota, will give young Native

Americans the opportunity to strengthen their communities in a variety of ways and get things done for America.

One less-than-welcome change has been the departure of Lt. General Andrew P. Chambers as AmeriCorps\* NCCC Director. When he accepted a position as Vice President and Operations Director of the University of Maryland Europe, I was designated acting director until a new director is appointed. I welcome the challenge.

With the new administration coming in, I—and the other AmeriCorps directors—don't anticipate any major changes in the way national service supports local communities. Our priorities will continue to tackle some of the toughest problems facing America and get things done for communities across this country.

Fred Peters  
AmeriCorps\*NCCC  
Acting Director

# Vet Reaches Out to Homeless Vets

When it comes to getting things done, Gerardo Robles can look back on quite a record during his year of AmeriCorps service. Because Robles is “so compassionate and caring,” he was able to help more than 500 homeless veterans get off the streets of Los Angeles, according to Susan Lux of U.S. Veterans Initiative, Inc.

A veteran himself—he was with the Air Force during the Gulf War—Robles served with U.S. Vets because he wanted to focus on his fellow veterans. “I try to help those who helped their country,” he said.

One veteran in particular stands out in his mind. “He had a 20-year history of crack abuse and was living under a bridge,” Robles said. “I filled out the paperwork required, got him the medical attention he needed, and placed him in a substance abuse program. He’s completed his program and is getting his life back. Every time I see him, he thanks me, but I tell him, ‘It’s you. You’re making this possible.’ ” All the thanks that Robles’ needs comes from witnessing the changes in the man’s health and lifestyle. “Seeing the process he’s gone through and seeing him back on his feet is really gratifying,” he said.

This was just the kind of experience Robles was seeking when he signed on with

AmeriCorps in October 1999. After hearing about the program through a friend and getting information from an information fair, he was sold. “It fascinated me that they had something that I thought I might want to do.”

Robles was assigned to outreach work in East Los Angeles, going to welfare offices, homeless shelters, and feeding stations, announcing his presence and seeking out veter-

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“It fascinated me that they had something that I thought I might want to do.”

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ans among the homeless. “I also went to parks. A lot of homeless people hang out in parks, so I went there early in the morning before they wake up and leave.”

Most of the veterans, like other homeless people, have either drug or psychiatric problems. But Robles focused on their immediate needs. “I would get some information on where they’re at now. If they had certain problems, like post-traumatic stress disorder, I referred them to the right place. I’m not qualified to deal with

that situation and they could misconstrue my questions.”

Robles found that “for the most part, they accept help. I found an occasional person that doesn’t trust the system, but usually they’re more than happy to get the help from us. I let them know of the available services, then leave it up to them.”

Robles, who finished his AmeriCorps service in September, hopes to go to law school. He graduated from CA State Long Beach with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.

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**FIRE LINE** Continued from page 1

can do. You have to respect that kind of stuff.” The first day out provided the most memorable moment for Wiegand. “We worked until midnight that night, and it was like seeing a million lights from a city—the whole mountain was just glowing.” None of the members reported feeling in serious danger as they fought the blaze. “There were a few times when I did feel kind of nervous, like when we were fighting the fire downhill. It spreads very fast that way, but I felt very comfortable out there with who I was with and what I was doing,” Cavaliere said. Park Ranger Jeff Pinkard, who works at Prince William Forest in Virginia, led a crew made up mostly of AmeriCorps\* NCCC members. He admitted to being apprehensive initially at the prospect of fighting

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# Helping Entrepreneurs Gain Access to Credit

For Diana Der Koorkanian, serving as an AmeriCorps\*VISTA member with ACCION in El Paso, Texas meant more than helping people with limited access to credit obtain business loans. It also meant reaping the rewards when one of those businesses—a restaurant—flourished.

“A client, Rosario Muñoz, had just started working on her first loan from ACCION when I began my service,” Der Koorkanian remembered. Muñoz and her husband were running a tortilla stand next to the ACCION office. They wanted to expand their business by opening a restaurant at another location. Their loan was approved, and the restaurant, *El Nopal* (The Cactus) was a hit from the start. But Der Koorkanian didn’t miss the tortilla stand, because the new restaurant was close to her home. “I got to eat the awesome food regularly,” she said.

Der Koorkanian and her fellow AmeriCorps\*VISTA member Melissa Torres then helped the Munozes with an application process to sell the company’s tortillas and tostadas through a local supermarket chain. As the business grew, the Munozes were able to hire eight employees, providing

needed jobs in the El Paso area. ACCION is a microlending program designed to give low-income entrepreneurs access to credit to open or expand their own businesses. Popular in developing countries, these credit programs have been successful in empowering people, particularly women, to become successful in the private sector. They are becoming increasingly common in the United States. For ACCION, which opened its first U.S. office in New York City in 1991 and now serves 21 cities and towns through five program sites, the average loan is \$5,600. People seeking such loans typically have a difficult time obtaining funds from commercial banks.

Just as small businesses are able to start up or expand using ACCION loans when banks turn them away, AmeriCorps\*VISTA has helped ACCION expand its own outreach. In 1998, just before members started to work with the program, ACCION had extended \$4.1 million in loans and had 481 new clients for the year. In the first six months of 2000, the organization loaned almost that amount—\$3.8 million—and had 510 new clients.

Catherine Collins, National AmeriCorps\*VISTA Project Manager for ACCION,

explained that “the whole purpose of our bringing on AmeriCorps\*VISTA members has been to expand our outreach. One of the biggest problems we have is that people don’t hear about us. It’s hard to reach out to people who are working out of their own homes.”

Members have found creative ways to get out the word, according to Carmen Jimenez, senior loan officer at ACCION in Chicago. One member discovered that for \$50 we would be able to advertise for a whole year on a cable information channel that runs 24 hours a day. The inquiries from that source alone have been incredible.

By contacting local TV stations, members have secured ACCION spots on a morning information show, a minority business report and other local shows, including a call-in show that ran for 13 weeks. They contacted Tupperware, Avon, and other home-based businesses with information that the companies could pass on to their sales representatives. One member even designed a loan product for women who sell Mary Kay Cosmetics.

The results of these efforts were soon obvious. Each borrower must attend an information session that is offered weekly. “Usually we get three

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# Your World—Your Chance To Make It Better

**H**ave you ever wondered how the ads to recruit members for AmeriCorps are developed? We know that potential members like to see and hear current members—not talking heads—but we wanted to know more about what types of messages and themes are most effective in generating interest in national service. During the summer, we used focus group research, mall intercept testing, and on-line bulletin boards to find out.

What emerged from the focus group research is that positive images, especially those with children, appear to resonate most strongly. Challenging images carry more risk. We used these

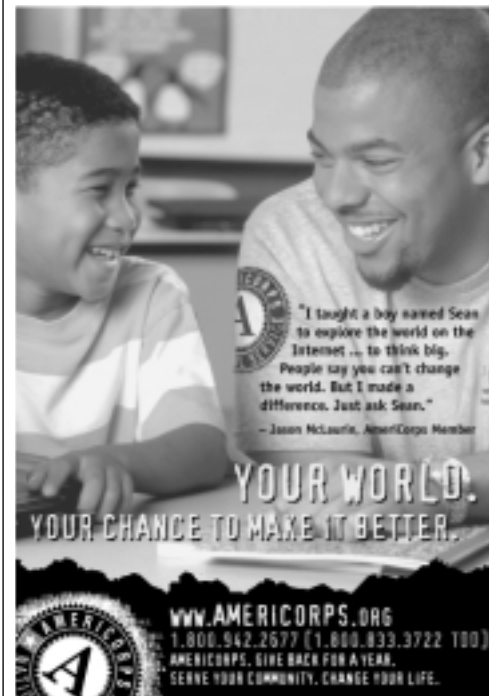


"Anything that initiates people into community service, I'm for. People have the time. AmeriCorps gives structure to the experience," said Brad Rahaman (above).

findings to create the first phase of AmeriCorps' new print ad campaigns (see final versions below and right).

In interviews at malls, two creative approaches were tested, and both were well received. Respondents expressed no clear preference for the different approaches to service. The tutoring ad was perceived as warm and engaging, making it a safer campaign. The homeless ad, in contrast, evoked strong reactions, both positive and negative. The subject matter is more evocative. Nevertheless, respondents said the ad showed that AmeriCorps cares. Both respondents and members commenting on-line emphasized that it was important to focus the campaign on the interaction between the member and person in the community—how by spending a year as an AmeriCorps member, you can make a difference in another person's life.

When the bi-lingual campaign—*Your World. Your Chance To Make It Better*—is launched in January, more than 12,000 print (newspaper and magazine) outlets will receive these ads. The tutoring ad—including a bilingual version—will be sent to more than 5,000 television and radio stations. To view these ads on the web, go to [www.americorps.org](http://www.americorps.org).



"I feel it is my duty to make sure that AmeriCorps, like the projects I work on, are alive and well long after I am gone," explained Jason McLaurin when asked why he participated in the recruitment campaign.

**ENTREPRENEURS** Continued from page 4  
people, sometimes none," Jimenez said. "With AmeriCorps\*VISTA members now doing outreach, however, the sessions are starting to attract crowds."

Mark Ruiz, who served as an AmeriCorps\*VISTA member in Chicago, returned for a second year with ACCION as a team leader. "I came back because there is so much to do here," he said. He has seen people come in looking for loans, "depressed because they got turned down by the banks. Once they are approved, they say it's a godsend. This is something worth being a part of."

Production of the first-ever AmeriCorps book is underway! More than 217 submissions were received. Several dozen are now being edited and sharpened prior to being printed in a mass market paperback. Here is one of the book's stories.

## When the Paint Fades: My AmeriCorps Story

by  
Amy Algoe-Eakin  
AmeriCorps\*VISTA  
Community Service-Learning Institute

On this day, Braddock—a depressed steel town near Pittsburgh—was being overrun with gray AmeriCorps shirts on street corners, under bridges, and in fire departments. I was one of those gray shirts. AmeriCorps members from all across Western Pennsylvania descended on Braddock to aid the local library in its community cleanup activities. I joined a team to repaint the curbs on the town's main street a bright yellow. This was to alert drivers not to park in certain locations along the street, most notably beside fire hydrants and handicapped areas on the sidewalks.

It wasn't long after I picked up a paintbrush, thick with yellow paint, and sat myself on the curb that I heard a voice above me. As I lifted my head and squinted my eyes toward the sunlight, I saw a young boy, about eight years old, dressed in jeans and a worn Steelers' tee-shirt. He said, "Can I help?" Not sure what to say, I looked around as if I was searching for someone else to answer and nodded "yes" in reply. The youngster, who told me his name was Greg, picked up a

paintbrush, dipped it in some paint, and began pushing the brush along the curb without a hint of hesitation.

Soon the awkwardness between us subsided as we began talking. I have to admit Greg was the talker of our duo.

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"He began to ask why I cared; it wasn't my street or even my town."

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He managed to bring me out of my shell as he asked where I was from and, more importantly, why I was painting the curbs on his street. As the afternoon progressed, his questions became more profound. He began to ask why I cared; it wasn't my street or even my town. Why would I care if the street curbs weren't freshly painted or if litter clogged the doorways of the abandoned storefronts? Because in all his life—in all those eight years—he had never seen anyone care about what his street looked like, not even the people who lived there.

You know, I had never

REALLY thought of why I was there. It was a service project. What else could it mean? But, as I thought about his question, I realized there was more. Although Greg was only an eight-year-old boy to the rest of the world, from that moment on, he was a wise young soul to me. He asked me a question I didn't have an answer to and I don't think many other adults would know how to answer—why do people care?

What do I tell him? How do I answer? Do I say that I want to give him some hope that the world does care about him and his community? Do I tell him that I feel sad that he lives in a community filled with trash? Does anything I tell him really make a difference? Could I possibly convey to him that I just want to help and that things can really be that simple—that I had time and wanted to help make his world and the Braddock community, at least for one day, a little cleaner and brighter, with freshly painted yellow curbs? Can an eight-year-old child understand that?

Honestly, I can't remember exactly what I told him. But it

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# Understanding How You Can Use Your Education Award



If you're like most members, you have questions about the education award that you will be eligible to receive once you complete your term of service. The National Service Trust provided the following questions as those most frequently asked by AmeriCorps members and alumni.

## **What can an education award be used for?**

It can be used to repay qualified student loans or to pay all or part of the cost of attending a qualified institution of higher education. It can also be used to pay expenses incurred while participating in an approved school-to-work program.

## **How is the amount of an education award determined?**

The amount of the award depends upon the length of service—whether the term of service is full- or part-time. The full-time award is \$4,725, and the part-time award is \$2,362.50. Occasionally a special program will be offered—for example, a summer program—that includes a “reduced part-time” award that will be proportional to the number of hours served. You are eligible to earn up to two

awards during your first two terms of service. You may not receive more than two education awards regardless of whether they are for full-time, part-time, or reduced part-time terms of service.

## **How long do I have to use my education award?**

The education award must be used within seven years of completing your service term. You can divide it up and use it any way you choose provided it is for authorized expenditures. For example, you could apply a portion of the award to repay existing qualified student loans and save the remainder to pay for authorized education costs in the future.

## **What expenses can my education award pay for?**

Each school determines its cost of attendance (COA) to calculate the amount of the award an alumnus is eligible to use. Your award can be used for that portion of the cost of attendance that has not already been covered by other sources of financial assistance. For example, if a school has determined that the COA for an academic year is \$12,000 and you are receiving \$8,000 worth of scholarships and loans, you would be eligible to use up to \$4,000 of your AmeriCorps education award to pay the

remaining COA.

For a full-time student, the COA can include tuition and fees, an allowance for books, an allowance for room and board, an allowance for transportation, and other expenses.

## **How can I postpone making payments on my student loan while serving in AmeriCorps?**

To have loan payments postponed—a process called forbearance—you must request it of the loan holder (generally the lender or loan servicer). In the forbearance process, the role of the National Service Trust is to verify that you are in an approved service position. The holder of the loan has the ability to grant a forbearance. During a forbearance period based on national service, interest continues to accrue on the loan. However, after you complete a term of service and earn an award, if the loan was in forbearance, the Trust will pay all or a portion of the interest that accumulated during the service period. The payment of interest is in addition to the education award; it is not taken from your education award balance.

**If you have other questions about your education award, please contact Charlene Dunn at [cdunn@cns.gov](mailto:cdunn@cns.gov)**

# Stretching Your Stipend—How DO You Do It?

**P**Everyone knows that AmeriCorps members get things done. It's our motto and our mission. But when it comes to

getting by—that is, living on the frugal amount provided—how do you do it?

Please share your tips and creative coping strategies with others! The best answers—the

most interesting and innovative—will be printed in the next issue of *AmeriCorps News*.

Send responses to Siobhan Dugan at [sdugan@cns.gov](mailto:sdugan@cns.gov).

## MY STORY Continued from Page 6

wasn't until later, after the paint was dry and our clothes permanently stained with paint, that I realized those curbs were never going to remain that bright yellow color and the sidewalks were not going to remain litter free. In fact, when I return to Braddock for other projects, I look at those curbs to see how they have faded and the paint has worn away. It is then that I realized what will always remain is the impact that Greg had on

me. I doubt that he will ever know how his one question made me think about my motivation for serving as an AmeriCorps member. I doubt that he will know how after one afternoon in his company, his question is something I think about almost daily as I continue to serve. I constantly ask myself, "why do I care?" I never come up with a very complex answer, but rather say to myself, "I just do."

## New Tribal Projects Seek Members

**A**mong the newest AmeriCorps projects is the Tribal Civilian Community Corps. Modeled on AmeriCorps\* NCCC, the residential projects will be based at four reservations in Alaska, Arizona, California, and Minnesota.

The projects will start in February, focusing on getting things done on reservations. Currently, projects are seeking applications from enrolled members of federally recognized tribes. For further information on specific locations, contact:

Alaska—Mike Taras, Tanana Chiefs Conference TCCC, 907/452-8251, ext. 3193; 907/459-3862, fax; or email [mtaras@tananachiefs.org](mailto:mtaras@tananachiefs.org)

Arizona—Wayne Claw, Navaho TCCC, 520/674-1842; or 520/674-5076 or 520/728-3502, fax

California—Colleen McCullough, Hoopa TCCC, 530/625-4413, ext. 25; 530/625-5444, fax; email [cmccullough@pcweb.net](mailto:cmccullough@pcweb.net)

Minnesota—Jacque Wilson, Mille Lacs TCCC, 800/922-4457 or 320/532-4457; email [jacquew@millelacsjobwe.nsn.us](mailto:jacquew@millelacsjobwe.nsn.us)

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a fire with a band of rookies. "As it turned out," he recalled, "they couldn't have been a better bunch of people. It's hard to describe how well they did. They did just about everything there was to do in a fire—in the first week."

Despite what Pinkard described as the "controlled chaos" of the work, the members were "upbeat and positive the whole way through." Individually, members report that they learned a tremendous amount about fires: how they are affected by wind and humidity; that rain during a fire can be a mixed blessing because lightning can ignite other spots; and the fact that fires "settle down at night."

Many members of the first teams were able to put their experience to use again, when they were redeployed shortly after returning to their campuses. Having gained this knowledge, several of the AmeriCorps\*NCCC members hope to keep their certification current and return to fight other fires once their AmeriCorps service is complete. "Most of my projects haven't had near the adventure," said Martinez.